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Denotative and Connotative Analysis of “Barbie Doll”

The mere mention of the name “Barbie” evokes many different images and feelings. For some Barbie is a fun toy most often played with by young girls. For these individuals Barbie brings to mind contented memories of playing with friends and pleasant feelings. However, Barbie also evokes an image of the ideal woman; a five foot nine inch tall blonde bomb shell with blue eyes and a perfect smile. Nonetheless, Barbie has come to represent a ridiculous stereotype of what a woman should look like. A poem by Marge Piercy addresses what Barbie has come to represent. The title of the poem, “Barbie Doll,” has a connotation, an attractive yet vapid woman, which runs deeper than its denotation, a popular toy doll.

By definition a “doll” is a children’s toy usually with the likeness of a human. The name “Barbie” refers but an entire line of toys and merchandise made by the company Mattel. The denotation of “Barbie” and “doll” combine to form “Barbie Doll” which refers to the original blonde plastic toy doll that people around the world recognize. The original “Barbie Doll” was released in 1959; since then “Barbie” has upheld many vocations ranging from veterinarian to President of the United States. However, this doll which was designed to catapult women into the future by exhibiting all things this gender could do, has hampered the emotional development and tarnished self esteem of some young girls and women. The poem “Barbie Doll” by Marge Piercy remarks upon this derogatory connotation associated with “Barbie Doll.”

One connotation of “Barbie Doll,” is that women’s place in the home is to cook and clean. In the opening of the poem the girl is given not only a “Barbie Doll,” but also “miniature GE stoves and irons” (3). “Barbie Doll” can be associated with homemaking; the juxtaposition of the gifting of a “Barbie Doll” with the giving of toys which are miniature household appliances reveals this negative connotation associated with “Barbie Doll.”

Another connotation of “Barbie Doll” is a mindless girl who cannot fend for herself. The girl in “Barbie Doll” is “healthy, tested intelligent, / possess[ing] strong arm” and “back.” (7-8). Clearly this young lady is bright and in good physical shape. However, this young female does not meet the standards of the ideal woman; according to the poem the ideal woman has no need for intelligence and needs the help of others to get by. The subject of the poem “Barbie Doll” does not fit this description, so she is looked down upon. This individual is self sufficient and strong (both mentally and physically). However, the ideal woman possesses no strength (whether it be mental or physical). Therefore, this bright and strong young girl, and any female like her, does not fit this vapid and helpless connotation of “Barbie Doll.”

Not only are “vapid” and “helpless” connotations for “Barbie Doll,” but also cold and unfeeling. It is well established that the subject of the poem “Barbie Doll” is the opposite of the connotations of the phrase “Barbie Doll.” This young girl goes “to and fro apologizing” (10). The young woman in this poem clearly is kind and genuine. However, “Barbie Doll” is cold and unfeeling and does not care what others around her think. Despite her pure character “[everyone] saw a fat nose on thick legs” (11). This girl possesses many positive traits and attributes but others only see her flaws.

Arguably the vainest connotation of “Barbie Doll” is a tall, very thin, and exceedingly attractive young woman. The girl that is portrayed in the poem “Barbie Doll” is not thin, tall, or attractive. She has “fat legs” (6). This young lady is clearly not thin enough to be a “Barbie Doll” because she is told to exercise and diet (14). Girls try so hard to be “Barbie Dolls,” as did this girl, that they lose their “good nature” and “[wear] out like [fan belts]” (15-16). This connotation of “Barbie Doll” is not only vain but also damaging.

All of these connotations of “Barbie Doll” are unfair and unjust. The young subject of the poem “Barbie Doll” can be inferred to be a pleasant and intelligent young girl. However, because she does not match a specific stereotype she is ridiculed to the point where she takes her own life (17-20). The central goal of this poem was to show how absurd the stereotypes conveyed by the connotations of “Barbie Doll.” This poem is achieves its goals because of the differences in “Barbie Doll’s” denotation and connotations. The denotation, a children’s toy, is so contrasted with the many connotations associated with “Barbie Doll.” The poem calls to mind this contrast and makes the reader think about the ridiculousness of the vain and outdated connotations of “Barbie Doll.”

Work Cited

Piercy, Marge. "Barbie Doll." *Perrine's Literature*. Eds. Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson.

Ninth ed. Boston: Thomson Wodsworth, 2006. 761-62.

